



Article

# “I’m a Poler, and Proud of It”: South Korean Women’s Managed Experiences in a Stigmatized Serious Leisure Activity

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**Abstract:** The primary purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of South Korean women “doing serious leisure” in what is widely known as a stigmatized activity, pole dance. It seeks to understand the experiences of South Korean women participating in pole dance and to investigate the strategies that are used to cope with the stigma that is experienced during participation. A qualitative research method was applied with an “insider” approach to collecting data. Data were collected through participation observations and in-depth interviews. The findings suggest that South Korean pole participants construct unstigmatized identities through their engagement in pole with its social stereotypes and stigma. Participants’ identities have been firmly embedded as “pole dancers”, “pole athletes”, or “polers”, which they do not feel the need to elucidate to those who are not active members. Their identities are surrounded and intertwined with their rationalized reason for participating in pole dance as serious leisure, along with their individual dedication which manifests their commitment by entering competitions and upgrading their pole skills. Participants and the pole dance community create a social atmosphere where their participation is not taken with stigma but rather with serious dedication to form their own interpretation of pole dance.

**Keywords:** pole dance; stigma; serious leisure; Korean women

## 1. Introduction

The etymology of the word ‘stigma’ originated from a Greek noun meaning ‘a mark’ or ‘a dot’ (Goffman 1963). In the modern usage of the word, its meaning has changed from figuratively labeling a category of people with moral problems or associated with deviant activities to including people who differ from traditional social roles and have attributes that are not confined to those of society, therefore viewed as ‘abnormal’ (Goffman 1963; Link and Phelan 2001). These marginalized groups of people experience inhumane treatment such as verbal assault, social disapproval and isolation. However, in recent years, the studies of stigma management explore how people in unwelcome situations such as mental illnesses (Rüsch et al. 2005), non-traditional sexual preferences (Corrigan and Matthews 2003; Cain 1991), sex workers (Benoit et al. 2019), and erotic dancers (Thompson et al. 2003; Bradley 2007) cope with their involvement in stigmatized activities. Despite the maltreatment a marginal group encounters, people voluntarily choose to take part in such practices. Furthermore, people deal with stigma through a broader approach by including not only personal traits, decisions, and careers which are thought to be ‘abnormal’, but also in serious leisure experiences.

Traditionally, leisure has been defined as a quality of experiences spent away from work, business, and education. When an individual pursues a leisure activity in which he/she intrinsically enjoys and ultimately develops a social identity that is geared around that activity, this corresponds to the concept of serious leisure. Serious leisure highlights people who express a serious attitude and strong

attachment to participating in specific leisure activities in which the activity transforms into something considered more than a hobby, but not a profession (Stebbins 1982).

Nonetheless, negative stereotypes and judgment from non-participants accompany certain forms of serious leisure. For example, Moe (2012) emphasizes strategies of how belly dancers manage stigmatizing comments toward belly dancers' serious participation. Through this study, it was found that belly dancers manage stigma experience through a combination of differentiating themselves from strip culture, keeping their participation under secrecy, and educating people who are unfamiliar with belly dance. Similarly, in the context of pole dance, its relations to striptease provoke it to be stigmatized (Donaghue et al. 2011). Pole dance as a vulgar sexual activity, originally performed in gentlemen's clubs, is viewed similarly to other non-traditional and controversial activities such as belly dance (Kraus 2010), lingerie football (Liu et al. 2016), and roller derby (Breeze 2013).

However, pole dance has recently become an international sensation among women as a fitness workout that builds body strength and flexibility (Holland and Attwood 2009; Donaghue et al. 2011). Holland (2010) points out the rapid growth of popularity of pole dance in recent decades and notes pole dance to be more than simply a dance or performance and emphasizes the development and skills involved, athleticism, and art by recalling it as pole fitness. Through the experiences of recreational pole dance participants, it was found they provide women with a medium to express their identity and develop athletic skills (Donaghue et al. 2011), form positive body images (Pellizzer et al. 2016; Dimler et al. 2017), and gain empowerment (Griffiths 2016). Despite stereotypes and resemblance to sexual activities, the space of pole studios was found to articulate the boundaries of adult entertainment, fitness, and sports (Fennell 2018). As the community of pole dancers and instructors identify pole dance as pole fitness as well as using other terms such as pole sport or pole art, the International Pole Sport Federation (IPSF) has currently been provisionally recognized for pole sport to be accepted as a conventional sport. and pole sport accepted as a conventional sport. Competitions such as the World Pole Sports Championships organized by the IPSF and The International Pole Championship (IPC) organized by the International Pole Dance Association (IPDFA) are held annually for competitive pole athletes.

Pole dance continues to carry a negative stereotype connecting the exploitation of women with pleasure for a male audience which marginalizes and judges those taking part in the activity (Griffiths 2016; Holland 2010). Women participating in pole dance have been given the impression to be associated with the sex industry, while others argue that participation in pole as a sport serves to innovate physical fitness and artistic movement (Fennell 2018). Regardless of the controversial and ambivalent arguments over pole dance, there is a continuous increase of participants worldwide. In the case of Korean women who take pole dance as a serious leisure activity, they experience stigmatizing remarks toward their involvement; however, they show similar yet different attitudes than those presented in Western literature. Due to the absence of gentlemen's clubs and strip culture in Korea, the perception of pole dance in society is built solely around Western media. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how participants enforce pole as a serious leisure activity, and how they cope with stigmatization surrounding pole dance participation as a serious leisure activity. Along with these questions, the nature of serious leisure and serious involvement and commitment to the activity from an "insider" approach are critically explored. Throughout the paper, pole dance will be referred to as pole to lessen the confusion surrounding the difference between its interpretation as a dance, fitness, and sport.

## 2. Background to the Study

### 2.1. Women's Experience in Stigmatized Serious Leisure

Serious leisure is a concept which Robert Stebbins (1982, 1992) has developed through ethnographic researches of people from diverse leisure activities from music, arts, and sports. It is described as a counterpart of casual leisure—a leisure activity considered to be pleasurable, enjoyable without

extended special training, and rather passive (Stebbins 1997). Six components define the theory of serious leisure activity including conquering a goal through adversity, progressive achievement, special training, belongingness as well as benefits, unique ethos, and identification. These features separate serious leisure from casual which is defined as, “immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training” (Stebbins 1997). These attributes distinguish serious participants from casual and non-serious participants. Furthermore, the concept of serious leisure includes those who are suggested as hobbyists, volunteers, and amateurs. Hobbyists and volunteers tend to gain compensation from their involvement such as costs for selling their services; however as amateurs, they seek to be differentiated from beginners. Amateurism is well linked with professionalism in which both characteristics show strong commitment and deep involvement, however, amateurs are most likely to be viewed as “near professional”, due to the fact that the commitment of the amateur does not necessarily point to a professional career (Stebbins 1982).

There has been an on-going relay of studies applying serious leisure as a key concept, although insufficiently focusing on female participation in leisure activity, of which a few take on gendered approaches. Bartram (2001) highlights a feminist approach toward extreme sport activity and emphasizes the diversity of identity—according to age, gender, and social class—is crucial to understand power relations in serious leisure kayaking. Raisborough (2006, 2007) suggests the negotiation of gender-specific demands and time to access leisure as well as the power dynamics within the social world of the leisure activity of women as sea cadets. Furthermore, studies of activities which are traditionally male dominated interpret female participation as a means of resistance from traditional norms such as climbing (Dilley and Scraton 2010) and rugby (Murray and Howat 2009).

However, resistance through female-oriented activities remarked as serious leisure among participants is mentioned in the study of female roller derby participants (Breeze 2013; Liu et al. 2016). Similarly, female dominated, non-traditional, and “not taken serious” activities such as belly dance (Moe 2012), pole dance (Donaghue et al. 2011), and lingerie football (Knapp 2015) are often marginalized despite studies having presented women experiencing empowerment and sisterhood as well as increase in popularity. Interestingly enough, notwithstanding social cultural stereotypes, stigmatization, and reputation, there is a persistent increase of the accumulation of its participation rates (Dale 2012). It is pointed out by Nicholas et al. (2018) that the stigmatized notion and the non-mainstream characteristics of the activity motivate and encourage women to begin or continue their involvement. This affiliation is motivated, according to Brewer (1991), by a favorable balance between one’s necessity of similarity with a group and of distinctiveness from others.

Generally, stigma occurs when an individual is participating in or possesses something that is found to be different, socially unacceptable, and is given a negative reputation, whilst we categorize people according to their attributes that are socially believed to be “normal” (Goffman 1963). Stigmatized activity categorizes people in such unorthodox situations as “abnormal”, and in the long run they lose social acceptance and are discredited. Furthermore, stigmatization happens wholly over three different ways: Physical deformities; individual character; and race, nationality and/or religion (Goffman 1963). However, “softer” forms of stigma can be recalled to understand its associations with voluntary serious leisure activities, in this case pole dance, similar to that of belly dancers (Kraus 2010; Ferree 2005). Ferree (2005) highlights a lighter arrangement of rejection which leads to lesser experiences of embarrassments and name-calling which is coined as “soft stigma”. It was found that “soft stigma” threatens people who have a positive understanding of belonging to a specific group. Moreover, belly dancers go through resistance, secrecy, personal management, and educating others in contradicting views of themselves as erotic dancers (Kraus 2010). Like belly dancers, pole dancers have relatable attributes; both are regarded as sexual and erotic to the public as well as being unacceptable in most societies.

For decades, pole dance has been known as a form of erotic dance in which women dance using a pole as a prop. It is used as a practice of entertainment for the gaze of an audience mostly in gentlemen’s clubs. There are many theories of its origin—from it being a male-based acrobatic physical

fitness activity to a performance by Egyptian female dancers touring North America. During the 1980s, pole dance was introduced in America where it morphed into a form of erotic dance to lure customers into bars. From the 1980s, pole dance incorporated athletic moves and tricks performed on a pole in Western societies. Later in the 1990s, pole gradually became a popular method of physical exercise which was practiced and taught in a variety of non-sexual athletic settings in pole studios that have connected its characteristics to fitness, transitioning its name from pole dance to pole fitness. The transformation of pole has created a discourse on the female and feminine body; trends of the fitness culture; controversies over regulation of the cultural and social understandings of the activity; its categorization as a sport; and in a microperspective, what and how women experience through their participation (Griffiths 2016).

It has been noted that pole has transformed from a provocative activity performed in night clubs to an activity which has been marketed as a form of exercise activity (Whitehead and Kurz 2009). Moreover, studies have revealed how women have tried to lessen the connection to adult entertainment as well as expressed how they are empowered through pole fitness (Fennell 2018; Griffiths 2016; Whitehead and Kurz 2009). From Western literature, Whitehead and Kurz (2009) mention how women have gained empowerment through pole dance classes and how women construct a space for themselves to actively resist dominant patriarchal ideas of feminine sexuality. Moreover et al. (2011) analyze how pole dancing studios are seen as a space for self-expression and self-display among women to gain personal confidence and means of power. In further studies, Holland (2010) suggests that pole dance is more than a form of art and dance but one that emphasizes athleticism and skill, simultaneously advocating female liberation and respect for the individual's body image, age, and gender. It explains that the enjoyment of sexualization was related to positive body image through pole fitness participation (Dimler et al. 2017; Pellizzer et al. 2016). However, due to the stigmatization of stripping, there have been negativity and judgmental remarks about participation (Griffiths 2016; Holland 2010). In addition, experiences of resistance and oppression have been mentioned during women's involvement in pole, while the recognition of pole is claimed to have been altered by taking it as an athletic activity rather than striptease (Dale 2012; Holland 2010).

The association between stripping and pole dancing originated in Canada during the 1990s as a form of sexual employment (Allen 2011). Professional dancers working in the sex industry are stigmatized due to the characteristics of their occupation being deviant (Thompson and Harred 1992; Thompson et al. 2003; Bradley 2007). Though it has been pointed out by McNair (2002) that strip culture is a form of liberation for female sexuality and confronts patriarchal structure. It is stated that striptease rather embodies and constructs the desire for female demonstration of sexuality and subordinates women within the structure of male dominance (Levy 2005). With this understanding of strip culture, "stripper stigma" is shaped around the atmosphere of media representation of strippers being portrayed to be "immoral" and "dirty" (Hallgrímsdóttir et al. 2008). The preoccupying notions regarding a stripper occupational characteristics determine the social perception of workers as sexual and promiscuous.

Due to pole's original connections to sex work, recreational pole participants cope with the stereotypes of stripper stigma (Gómez-Ramírez 2007). Instructors separate pole and stripping by encouraging women to understand pole as a form of exercise and sport, while participants challenge stereotypes by "distinguishing themselves between being sexy and slutty" (Gómez-Ramírez 2007). Some practitioners of recreational pole dance have made efforts to separate stripping and exercise by enforcing athletic elements and transformed terms by adding suffixes such as exercise, fitness, and sports. However, there seems to be a vague line between recreational pole and pole dance in strip clubs, mostly because of the origin of the activity which leads to stereotypes and stigmatization of pole participants.

## 2.2. The Ambivalent Translation of Pole Dance in Korea

There has not been any academic material reviewing the involvement of pole dance in Korea. In the Korean language, pole dance is translated as “bongchom”. The meaning in Korean gives an indication of decadence and vulgarity which is an area that has not been much studied within Korean academia. Interestingly, the image that pole dance portrays is mostly through media and strip culture from Western sources. This is due to the fact that gentlemen’s clubs and strip culture are non-existent in Korea. There are no clubs or entertainment venues that have pole dancers who strip in front of an audience. Therefore, the perspective on pole dance in Korea and in connection with its origin from strip clubs can be perceived differently from that of Western literature.

In the last two decades there has been a continuous increase of media coverage from early 2000’s to present day of Korean women performing and practicing pole dance as a form of fitness. In 2006, a Korean online news article mentioned how pole dancing had become a type of popular fitness in Australia and its physical fitness benefits alongside participation among both men and women (Bae 2006). One of the top major broadcasting companies in Korea, MBC (footnote 1), shortly introduced pole dancing as a fitness activity which many Hollywood stars are joining as a method of exercise (MBC 2007).<sup>1</sup> Though they briefly mention how pole is rather a form of fitness than a dance, both media reports do not comment on whether Korean women participate or if there are any pole studios in Korea. Relatively, the news depicts pole dance as a “foreign way” of exercise. In 2009, a news article shared an interview with the owner of Pole Dance Korea where she stated the benefits that were gained through the exercise (Shin 2009).<sup>2</sup> Most recent, Korean pop-stars’ dance routines have included basic pole dance moves and tricks in music videos and concerts. For example, female recording artists Gain in 2012, K-Pop girl group After School in 2013, and Mamamo in 2018 have performed pole dance in media contents.

In a three-chapter series of exclusive interviews from Sports Seoul in 2017, one of Korea’s popular pole studio owners and instructors, ‘Poling Mia’, explains how pole is a sport in which anyone can be involved as well as a means to gain physical and mental benefits, based on her personal experiences (Sports\_Seoul 2017a, 2017b, 2017c).<sup>3</sup> In the *Asia Business Daily*, another domestic pole instructor’s experiences were published which were similar to those of ‘Poling Mia’. In this series, Youngji Kim emphasized how pole fitness helps get rid of cellulite and creates a toned body figure (Moon 2018a, 2018b). Both interviews highly emphasize the athleticism of pole and indicate how pole is misunderstood in Korea due to less clothing being worn during the practice of the activity and its origin SBS.<sup>4</sup> News featured Eunji Jung who has been representing Korea as a pole athlete and became the first Korean to enter the Pole Championship Series—a professional pole fitness league for elite professional pole athletes. Throughout the article she mentions her struggles as a pole athlete on a personal level as a mother and as a Korean female and on a societal level in which she hopes to overcome stereotypes of pole all over the world (Chae 2018).

Despite social stereotypes of pole, the community of pole participants in the Korean scene puts in efforts to change misleading and negative misperceptions of pole dance by introducing physical benefits and exercise experiences. However, the community’s idea of pole is rather frowned upon despite the growing number of pole participants as well as pole dance studios in Korea. International

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<sup>1</sup> Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) is one of the top three public broadcasting companies in South Korea, which was established in 1961. It currently has the largest broadcasting production facilities in the nation.

<sup>2</sup> Pole Dance Korea is the first pole studio in South Korea, which was established in 2008. Though it is not the largest studio in Korea in the current years, it is the longest running pole studio that hosts annual performances, regional competitions, and world championships.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Poling Mia’ is the online user name of director/pole dancer of Polers Korea Pole Dance Studio in Seoul, Korea. Polers Korea Pole Dance Studio is one of the largest pole dance studio institutions which owns a total of four studios in different locations within Seoul.

<sup>4</sup> The Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS) is a national television and radio network system which was founded in 1990. It is one of the top three publicly distributing broadcasting companies along with MBC and KBS (Korea Broadcasting System).

and national pole dance championships are held yearly and the number of women participating at amateur and professional levels is rapidly increasing. There are two major competitions which are held annually—Angels Cup (since 2014) and Seoul International Pole Dance Competition (since 2016)—in which the increase of competitors maintain the opening of new competitions. Furthermore, the main source employed by the pole community to communicate and share pole tricks and videos worldwide is steered through constant updates of pole routines, which are uploaded generally via Instagram—social networking system (SNS).

It is evident that pole dancing has been and is relatively perceived as a form of erotic dance that is highly associated with the female body, leading to sexual objectification; nevertheless, many Korean women are participating and view it as a combination of physical fitness and art. Seemingly, there are no gentlemen's clubs and strip culture in Korea. Therefore, it is not exaggerated to state that pole in Korea has settled as a fitness activity in spite of the societal image of pole dance which is created around the characteristics set by Western media sources that portray the culture of striptease. It is interesting to note that there coexist both conceptions of pole dance set by Western media, vulgar and ostentatious, simultaneously, easily absorbing pole dance as a physical exercise because strip culture is not directly experienced inside Korea.

### 3. Method

This study is based on a qualitative methodology that allows the researcher to gain access to explore the phenomenon from an “insider's” point of view—enabling the researcher to gain access to restricted locations and benefits when recruiting participants, which helps establish rapport in a much easier way. This is usually difficult, for an “outsider” is not welcome to approach (Ergun and Erdemir 2010). One of the authors of the study participated in pole dance as an active participant and competitor; therefore, it positions the researcher as an “insider”. However, this standpoint can expose the researcher to dilemmas during field observations and participation such as compromising a non-bias stance throughout the gathering of enriched data and balancing a friendly relationship with the research participants (Taylor 2011). To objectively describe gathered data, both authors repeated readings of interview responses and observation notes over time to thoroughly understand discovered themes. Member check was used to clearly understand the intentions and experiences of each research participant. Additionally, multiple data sources from participants, such as formal interview responses, observation notes, and informal conversations were examined continuously by both authors.

Participants were recruited in person from a pole dance studio in Seoul, South Korea where the researcher had participated as a member between 2014 and 2017. Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants who met specific predetermined criteria. Six participants were selected to be part of the study. All participants had experiences in taking pole classes for least two years alongside participation in certification courses and competitions. To reach the purpose of this study, face-to-face in-depth interviews and observations from an “insider” stance of six Korean female pole participants were conducted.

Prior to initiating the study, informal conversations were exchanged between the researcher and the participants regarding experiences and motivations to begin pole as well as to participate in certification courses and competitions. These informal conversations assisted the researcher to develop rapport, which later helped guide the pilot semi-structured interview questions towards formal face-to-face in-depth interviews. Individual interviews were held up to at least three times and up to four sessions in which each lasted approximately an hour and a half. During interviews a voice recording device was used to record the conversations. All interviews were held in Korean; however, one participant was fluent in English; thus, one participant out of the seven answered in English. Interviews were transcribed in Korean then translated to English by the researcher with the assistance of another bilingual Korean-English speaker to ensure the accurate definition of meanings between the languages. Confusing interview responses were asked continuously to the research participants to operate a member check in order to fully understand each participant's intentions behind their answers.

Participant observations were made during pole classes, practice sessions, and at competition venues between 2016 and 2018. The researcher kept a field journal to write observations of participants' experiences and personal routines related to pole before, during, and after each practice and competition. Field notes were taken after competition preparation sessions and after pole classes. The researcher was involved in three competition preparation sessions, which each lasted for three months prior to competition and took classes at least twice a week. Therefore, a minimum of two journal observation entries were recorded in addition to entries before competitions. Field observations were useful when creating semi-structured interview questions. Interview questions began with questions asking the following: What do you think about your experience in pole? Do you experience stigmatizing perceptions of participation from others and who are they? How do you respond to stigmatizing comments? To secure confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were used throughout the study. Table 1 describes the profile of each of the research participants.

**Table 1.** Description of research participants.

Name	Age	Years of Participation	Participated Competitions	Occupation
Soomi	38	4	2 Nat'l	Employee
Dohee <sup>1</sup>	33	3	2 Int'l 2 Nat'l	English instructor
Haeji	33	3	2 Nat'l	Self-employed artist
Yeonhee	30	5	1 Nat'l	Office employee
Sooji	25	4	1 Nat'l	Graduate student
Minji	23	3	5 Nat'l	Part-time employee

<sup>1</sup> English speaking participant.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Creating “Unstigmatized” Identities through Engagement of Serious Leisure: “I AM a Pole Dancer, Pole Athlete, Poler”

It was found that participants do not have occupations related to pole or any other form of fitness exercise. Despite their professional careers having no relation to physical movement and activities, participants do not seem to have any trouble in considering themselves “pole dancers”, “polers”, and “pole athletes”. Having special identities separates the participants from being a simple participant in pole. The formation of identity creates the individual's commitment and seriousness to the leisure activity which is explained through the concept of serious leisure. Labelling themselves with specific vocabulary was influenced by the international pole community via Instagram. Participants share information and pole tricks with each other at an international level through the SNS platform. Interestingly, “pole dance”, “poler” and “pole athlete” have the same meaning as the English words and the pronunciation is written in Korean, indicating each word's definition as it is with only slightly different pronunciation. Pole language shared on SNS stretches from the names of pole tricks to situations that only polers can understand during practice such as, for example, getting bruises from practice would be indicated as getting “pole kisses”, as well as identifying themselves as pole dancers, polers, and pole athletes in relation to the type of pole they participate in. According to the in-depth interviews, three main identities were discussed in relation to “performing different types of pole” as well as the depth of the experience. The titles that women gave themselves referred to the different personal interpretations of pole. Haeji points out how she believes herself to be a “pole dancer”. She explains how her pole dance activity includes techniques and spins, though because it is originated from dance, she insists in calling herself a “pole dancer”.

*“I think of myself as a pole dancer. I don't know what other people will say about that. But I believe I am. Pole dance has tricks and skills, techniques you have to learn, but it's from dancing. That's why it's called pole dance and that's why I'm a pole dancer.” —Haeji*

Though, not all women believe that pole dance is simply a form of “dance”. During the interviews with Dohee, she interprets pole through the athletic and sport-like image it portrays. Pole nowadays has a variety of styles accompanied by similar techniques and skills; however, different body movements define the type of pole that participants are engaging in. Pole combines other art forms of movement such as exotic dance, ballet, jazz, Latin dance, etc. The different combinations in which women participate shape their perception of how they see pole as well as their personal identity within the pole community. In this case, Dohee views pole as a sport by explaining how pole and gymnastics are alike.

*“It’s totally a sport. TOTALLY. Not only do you have to be flexible, but you also have to have the strength. It’s like gymnastics. So for me, I’m a pole athlete.” —Doohee*

Dohee is ethnically Korean and was brought up in a Korean family. However, she spent her childhood and teenage years abroad in a Western society. For her, participating in physical activity comes very naturally, unlike the other participants who did not have any other experience in other sports prior to pole. The only other participant who had experience in another sport was Yeonhee. Yeonhee stated that she used to be an active Taekwondo participant, earning her black belt and going up the grades of Taekwondo; however, she did not take part in competitive Taekwondo. She also points out how she sees herself as a “pole athlete” because of the type of pole she is engaging in. Her identities as “pole athlete” and “pole dancer” coexist and are flexibly used depending on the style of pole she is engaging in.

*“There are different types of pole dance, I consider myself as the athlete rather than the dancer part. I’m not such a good dancer. But it does depend on which style you choose, like I’ll be the pole athlete when I’m practicing tricks, but when I’m doing exotic pole dance, then that’s when I’m a pole dancer.” —Yeonhee*

Soomi called herself a “poler” excluding any indication of herself as a dancer or athlete. She gives her strong opinion of why pole is closer to being a sport than simply a dance, which is a comment that all participants made during their interviews. Before Soomi began pole, she had never experienced any other form of exercise or sport. Throughout the meetings she highlighted how she was not accustomed to exercising, yet she believed it was interesting to herself how she had a passion for her participation as a “poler”. Furthermore, she mentions the commonalities of gymnastics and pole. Though Soomi and Doohe both consider pole to be similar to gymnastics, their identities differ between “pole athlete” and “poler”.

*“The term ‘poler’ is correct. Because I’m not just a dancer. I don’t just dance. I do pole tricks and techniques, and that’s not all dancing. You need core and arm strength, coordination. It’s a sport. What’s so different from gymnastics? Just the fact that I’m using a pole to do the techniques. So dancer? I don’t think so. Just poler. It means someone who does pole.” —Soomi*

Controversial and non-traditional activities such as roller derby show similar attributes and social negotiation to those of pole. Roller derby participants highlight how their respected activity is not considered “a real sport” nor “taken seriously” (Breeze 2013). Even for pole participants, they emphasize how their participation is not “taken seriously”. Due to these assumptions, in 2016, the International Pole Sports Federation (IPSF) submitted an application to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to be recognized as an official sport for it to become an official sport of the Olympics. A year later, the IPSF became recognized as an international sporting body which states that pole is temporarily accepted as a sport. This is a steppingstone among the many standards that the federation needs to fulfill in order to qualify to become an Olympic sport—to be signed up as a member of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), to be a full member of the Global Association of International Sports Federation (GASIF), and to have at least 50 national federations (BBC 2017). This can be linked to how pole is conceived among pole participants and the pole community. As international federations are making efforts to systemize pole sport as a sport, the identities of the participants are

built around the surroundings within the pole community and how they think of themselves during their participation. Therefore, in spite of the descriptions of pole to be associated with only pole dancers, participants strongly agree with the fact that they are dancers yet athletes, and in general believe to be “polers” all at the same time.

#### 4.2. Enforcing Tactics to Endure Serious Participation: “I Want to PERFECT My Tricks”

Serious leisure participants’ seriousness and commitment keeps them from staying as beginners or novices and rather enhances their ability and skills within the leisure practice (Stebbins 1982). This is shown in other studies where kayakers take advantage of indoor lessons and skill development sessions which later guide them toward a career in kayaking (Bartram 2001). Time and perseverance are needed to attend these lessons as well as to become a certified pole instructor. Thus, serious leisure participants go to great lengths to manage their personal schedules to commit to the activities that are necessary to “becoming more of a professional” (Raisborough 2006; Wheaton 2004). Therefore, in this study, participants aim to pursue a higher level of knowledge and skill through certification courses that teach high-level pole tricks. Certification courses are classes for advanced level participants who at the end of the course obtain a license to teach beginner pole classes. Though course duration differs amongst studios, the main purpose is to partake in intense training, gain knowledge for teaching, and acquire high-level pole tricks that are not taught in other beginner or amateur classes.

*“It’s for self-satisfaction. And I wanted to learn the proper way of poling. For me it wasn’t to become an instructor or anything, but I wanted to be able to do high skilled pole tricks. Plus, it wouldn’t hurt to be a certified pole instructor.” —Yeonhee*

It was found that research participants enrolled in certification courses after an average of six months to a year of beginner classes. Due to their long commitment to the activity, they felt the urge to perform high-level tricks, comparing themselves to beginners. Serious leisure participants tend to differentiate themselves from novice practitioners, which heightens their deep commitment and active engagement as well as belongingness to the associated community (Stebbins 1982). Yeonhee and Sooji both highlighted they wanted to improve their ability and level of pole tricks. Yeonhee even mentioned how her certification could be a rather personal benefit. This is comparable to serious leisure involvement in Taekwondo (Kim et al. 2011) and umpiring (Phillips and Fairley 2014) in which participants involvement transformed their leisure activity to eventually professional careers. In this study, women firmly were willing to invest time and money to gain knowledge and perform advanced skills, rather than investing to build a career.

*“I wanted to be a sophisticated poler, meaning that I wanted to perfect my tricks. But certification classes are much more expensive, almost ten times more than normal beginner or intermediate classes. But I just wanted to be really good. Like a real poler. So I guess I couldn’t complain about the prices.” —Sooji*

Participants were permitted as licensed official instructors after certification courses; however, the research participants did not purposely enlist in the classes to teach at pole studios as either a permanent or temporary job. Throughout conversations, it was obvious that the financial status of these women influenced their decision to take part in the certification courses. The cost of the course was highly expensive; the amount of time invested in taking the course was high and practicing to pass the course needed much dedication. Dedication and investment are also both elements of participants who are involved in serious leisure activity (Stebbins 1992). Furthermore, in the last week of the course, participants were to perform a personal routine as a “graduation performance” in front of an audience of mostly close friends and other female participants from the studio.

After the certification course, all recruited research participants entered either national or international competitions. Competing was recommended by the pole studio owners. The process to enter competitions has become a natural step after “graduating” from the intense training course. With

their certifications, they enter competition as semi-professional polers. To compete at a professional level, it is mandatory to have experience in teaching as well as other criteria such as experience competing in higher level competitions and having trophies in semi-professional divisions. “Graduating” and going on to compete has become somewhat like a tradition within this particular studio. Participants believed that competitions worked as a catalyst to strive for better pole techniques but most of all as a personal achievement.

*“It’s an art and if it isn’t seen or it isn’t shown to an audience, then no one will know about it. I think it’s a good opportunity to show-off what I have been doing and what I am capable of.” —Minji*

Minji points out how she perceives pole as a form of art which needs to be presented in front of an audience. She is enthusiastic about performing and agrees that it is an opportunity to reinforce her capabilities as a pole participant. However, the passion to show and present their skills to significant others is common amongst all participants. They all mention how they want to show others the art-like dimensions of pole as well as the athletic and strength-demanding aspects. In a way, participants feel as though they need to prove to others the stigmatized values of pole. Dohee points out resistance toward social preconceptions regarding pole by stating the reason to perform.

*“People think it’s stripping. It’s not. It’s a sport. And the only way for people to understand that it is a sport is for us to perform. They won’t know it until they see it for themselves.” —Dohee*

In the previous study of belly dancers’ stigma management (Moe 2012), dancers use education as a technique to alter the stereotypes and stigma surrounding their activity by emphasizing personal benefits such as self-esteem and positive body image; on the other hand, participants of this study not only talk about benefits gained through exercise but also are willing to perform and show the dynamic elements that pole demands. Certification courses and competitions begin from the basis of participants being passionate about their engagement. Their passion and interest in the activity is reinforced through their achievements passing courses, becoming certified instructors, and winning at competitions that build their seriousness and commitment. Therefore, they feel as though they are the human agents who can change stereotypes of pole as being vulgar, unladylike, and sexual.

#### 4.3. Coping with Stigmatizing Remarks in the Context of Korea: “My Bruises Are a Trophy”

One of the characteristics that pole has is the fact that little clothing is worn; therefore, the friction between participants’ bare skin and pole results in frequent bruises, blisters, and occasional cuts. Pole participant outfits consist of bra tops and short pants. The exposure is not to appeal to an audience or have any sexual intention but rather for safety reasons. It is easier to stay on the pole with bare skin, and if there is clothing between the pole and the participant, there is a higher chance of falling off the pole or not being able to accomplish certain pole techniques. Participants mention how they endure the pain and feel as though the bruises and cuts are a “symbol of triumph”.

*“Bruises mean so much. At first, it’s kind of embarrassing, but now they feel like it’s a mark of achievement. When I don’t get them, I think, maybe I didn’t practice hard enough. Maybe I wasn’t concentrating.” —Minji*

*“The thing is you’ll get more bruises as a beginner. As you get better you get new bruises on different parts of your body. It feels like you’re going up a level.” —Dohee*

As a novice, it is easier to get bruises on their chins, knees, and inner thighs as Dohee mentions. As time passes, bruises occur on different parts of the body; however, cuts and bruises can be seen as an inevitable part of pole. Minji even points out how bruises identify her effort and concentration in practicing pole. This indicates how participants tolerate their bruises as an outcome of their “serious” involvement in pole. Within the global pole community, bruises made during pole are called “pole kisses”. This helps define how polers perceive bruises. It can be understood as an indication of their

active efforts to strive and their passionate dedication to pole. Moreover, it shows how bruises are taken as “kisses”, which also expresses their positive affection toward their hard work. In “doing serious leisure”, one of the main components include adversity (Stebbins 1992). As stigmatized as the activity is, bruises and cuts from pole participation reinforce stigmatization, creating more discredit and discomfort toward pole. Bruises for long have been indicated as signs of violence, aggressiveness, and physical contact and are not considered to be a feminine attribute, which has been discussed among female rugby athletes (Paul 2015) and in roller derby (Finley 2010). Similarly, it is found in roller derby that bruises are “served as a badge of honor” (Carlson 2010).

In contrast to how bruises are interpreted within the pole community, it was highlighted that those outside of the community question why and how participants get their bruises and cuts. Sooji explained to those who asked for the reason of getting bruises; however, she strongly points out that as time passed she did not feel the need to clarify why she had bruises and cuts on her body to significant others and why she was continuing her practice in spite of the bruises.

*“At first I would show my bruises and pole tricks through my videos to people who didn’t understand where I got them [bruises]. But now, I don’t feel the need to explain myself. Pole is a part of me. Why do I need to explain this? People don’t normally explain why they are the way they are. It’s actually pretty rude to ask someone why they are who they are. Doing pole is the same thing.” —Sooji*

Sooji firmly gives her opinion and stance of herself as a person and her involvement in pole. It shows her dedication and commitment to pole by stating that “pole is a part of me”. In one conversation with Soomi, she mentions how she explained bruises to her husband. Her husband had confronted her about being physically injured. Interestingly, she has a personal pole installed inside her home, which made it easier for her to demonstrate how she got the bruises to her husband. She states that her husband did not seem to mention any opinion against her participation as long as she did not get severely bruised or came home with a broken bone. In contrast to Kraus (2010) research of how belly dancers had a separate social world and kept belly dancing a secret, research participants in this study did not keep their involvement under secrecy. They seemed to be open and proud of their participation, competition achievements and daily practices.

All participants use a SNS account where they regularly upload personal pole trick clips. The SNS platform has become an effective platform for pole participants all around the world to share pole tricks, techniques, and information. This has become an outlet for participants to reinforce their passion and identities as well as to strengthen bonds between all pole participants creating “sisterhood”. Sisterhood entitles women to strongly feel associated with each other’s respected style of pole and operates as a stimulation to break stigmatized claims by embracing hardcore pole techniques; simultaneously, stigma motivates participants to have more serious attachment (Nicholas et al. 2018). Korean pole participants and especially pole studio owners and instructors have chosen to stay distanced from exotic dancers by actively differentiating themselves through pole techniques, performances, and competitions (Holland 2010). Ultimately, gentlemen’s clubs and strip bars is non-existent in Korean culture. Night clubs and bars prohibit full nudity. Due to this social atmosphere, it seems easier to validate pole as fitness despite Western media’s portrayal of pole’s origin in strip clubs.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

This study focuses on the concept of serious leisure as a framework to understand the experiences of female pole participants in Seoul, South Korea. As pole dance is stigmatized due to its origin in strip clubs in the West, the study seeks to understand how the participants cope with their “serious” participation and “outsider” objectifications and stereotypes. It was apparent that to identify the formation of serious leisure through participation observations and in-depth interviews as an “insider” from the activity’s community helped gain access to information and participants at a more personal level. As an “insider” researcher, understanding the language and vocabulary used among the

participants was easily done, which assisted in understanding detailed information about their participation and opinions of pole.

For the participants, pole had become an important activity, partially “a part of their life”, which adds to being characterized as a serious leisure activity. Serious leisure is a concept according to which people participate in leisure activity outside of their professional work life. It is defined as “the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for a participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its special skills and knowledge” (Stebbins 1982). He points out the six components which create the sense of “doing serious leisure”. The characteristics of serious leisure participants include overcoming adversity, dedication, learning special skills, lasting benefits, creating unique cultures, and identifying their distinct involvement (Stebbins 1992). Korean female pole participants invest their personal time and money to participate in certification courses to learn high-level techniques and skills to enhance their ability in pole. Their involvement in certification courses leads to competitive pole dance and to enter national and international competitions. Regardless of their occupations, participants’ serious pole engagement emphasizes their identities as “pole dancers”, “pole athletes”, and “polers”. Participating in high-level classes and competitions differentiates them from novice participants and frames them as serious leisure participants, which enriches and enforces an “unstigmatized” identity.

The dedication to a female-oriented, non-traditional activity situates participants in a unique social sphere in which their identity formation is discussed solely within the community rather than being influenced by societal perceptions. This brings up a limitation of the study because there is an inevitable circumstance of pole that produces ambivalence: The general audience is derogatory towards it, but nonetheless, it is considered as a sport among pole participants and their community (Holland 2010). It is important to contemplate how women interact with their social surroundings and their individual participation in pole. However, in this study, resistance or struggles of participation were not discussed in a social sphere; rather, the focus was on how serious Korean women are and how they cope with the stigmatized image of pole. Participants did not mention resistance to their participation but rather how they perceive themselves within the activity. Moreover, participants reach a stage where “outsider” remarks or stereotypes of pole do not bother them nor have an influence on their participation, rather encouraging them to be straightforward with their identifications as a “pole dancer”, “pole athlete”, or “poler”. Managing stigmatization is dealt with through their determination and firm development of their individual identity and commitment to pole. The indications of their identities illustrate their interpretation of pole which shapes the definition of pole and how it is more than what Western media and culture provides.

Furthermore, stereotypes and stigma are experienced through bruises and cuts gained during pole practice. Women see these “marks” as a “symbol of triumph” while “outsiders” question why there are bruises and cuts on their bodies in the first place, which leads to questions such as why they are participating in pole dance when it leaves marks on their bodies. Participants view their “symbol of triumph” as an indication of their hard work and persistence on pole practice. However, in their early stages of participation, they explain and teach—similar to belly dancers (Kraus 2010)—others why and how they gain bruises which also clarifies why they wear little clothing during practice and performance. However, in contrast to the belly dancers of Kraus (2010) research, pole participants do not keep their participation in pole under secrecy. Participants were comfortable to share and discuss their involvement in pole and do not feel the need to reconcile or negotiate what others think of “poling” (doing pole). In regards to the politics of secrecy, the connection between front-stage and back-stage from Goffman’s theory of impression management modeled from theater discusses a distinction between public and private space from the actors view (Goffman 1959). Although in this study, participants seem to not separate how they express themselves to the public and how they perceive their identity. Therefore, participants openly share their pole participation while reinforcing their deep commitment by stating their gained bruises and marks as trophies. In addition, similar to the participants of Dimler et al. (2017) study of pole dancers, Korean women get support and

encouragement from the pole community during their practices. The environment with which women are acquainted—the pole studio—provides them with a welcoming and comfortable setting to express and pursue who they are as polers. The influence of the social environment of the pole studio manifests the involvement of pole participants, which guides them to become serious leisure members. The seriousness of the pole participants' experiences plays a vital role in the ways they manage stigma. And the seriousness is once again proved through tangible landmarks such as certifications and trophies from competitions.

In Western societies, topless dancers, erotic dancers, and strip teasers have been stigmatized for having deviant occupations (Thompson and Harred 1992; Gómez-Ramírez 2007; Bradley 2007). In the case of Korean women's participation in pole, it does not have clear connections to erotic dance and striptease due to the absence of occupations related to strip clubs and of stripping performances in front of an audience. Therefore, the stigmatization of pole was rather focused on simply having little clothing and getting bruises, and there is only an assertion that pole originates from strip clubs in Western societies. Thus, the idea of pole participants engaging in stripping and experiencing “stripper stigma” was not an issue Korean participants had to cope with. As a society highly influenced by Confucianism, there seems to be a controversial yet mutual understanding of pole. Korean society is developing and constantly changing by kicking out most of the old generation ideologies regarding norms for traditional gender roles and absorbing “new” Westernized culture, while creating another dimension of popular culture. Traditional contexts and cultural norms were not emphasized throughout the research, which leaves the question open for further studies to look into the cultural aspects of pole and female participation in Korea. It was obvious that participants did not have to negotiate the femininity and masculinity surrounding pole engagement as discussed in previous studies of female participation in male-dominated sports, but resistance and negotiation seem to co-exist as with boxers (Mennesson 2000), climbers (Dilley and Scraton 2010), and rugby players (Murray and Howat 2009). Moreover, pole dance as a bodily performance that exposes much of the body is a physical activity which could generate gender identity regarding body image and sexuality. Therefore, it is suggested for further studies to examine gender roles, images, and femininity in a cultural and social aspect.

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